

## The Fortunes of Hungarian Children's Literature at Home and in the English-Speaking World

Anna Bentley

**Abstract:** This paper asks why so few works of Hungarian children's literature have made it to publication in English-speaking countries. It finds that few translated children's books make it onto the English-language market and those translations that are successful mainly appear in major European languages. Representation at the Bologna Children's Book Fair has been dogged by a lack of financial resources and polish while Hungarian State funding has lacked continuity. Nearly all the English translations of Hungarian children's books available today have been published in Hungary, although a book will occasionally find its way to foreign publishers by informal means. This paper also follows the development of Hungarian children's literature from the late nineteenth century to the present day, noting changes in terms of character, subject matter and attitudes to diversity and use of the fairy-tale tradition. It outlines one recent controversy surrounding the publication of *Meseország mindenkié* ['Storyland for Everybody'], a book which aims, in contrast to the current regime's ideology, to represent the marginalized in Hungarian society. It also details recent clashes sparked by the new Hungarian National School Curriculum and one writer's feminist critique of a classic text.

**Keywords:** *Hungarian children's literature, fairy tales, diversity, Meseország mindenkié, English translation, publishers, book-shredding, National Curriculum, Móra Könyvkiadó, Pozsonyi Pagony, Bologna Children's Book Fair, Petőfi Literary Fund*

**Biography:** Anna Bentley is a freelance British literary translator based in Budapest since 2000. Her translation of Ervin Lázár's children's classic, *Arnica the Duck Princess* was published by Pushkin Children's Press in 2019. In the same year, her translation of Anna Menyhért's study of five forgotten Hungarian women writers, *Women's Literary Tradition and Twentieth-Century Hungarian Writers*, was published by Brill. Her translations of poetry and prose have appeared in *Asymptote's* Translation Tuesday blog, in *Trafika Europe's* online journal, in *Consequence Magazine* and on *Hungarian Literature Online*. [annaatbudapest@gmail.com](mailto:annaatbudapest@gmail.com)

In recent years, it has been pleasing to see a handful of Hungarian authors and their translators winning recognition in the English-speaking literary world. Nearly every book that has succeeded in attracting the attention of English-language publishers was, however, written for adult readers. What, then, does Hungarian children's literature have to offer, and why is it failing to reach readers in the English-speaking world? I will endeavour to answer these questions by looking at how Hungarian children's fiction has developed over the last century or so (touching on poetry only briefly) and what characterizes it today. I will also discuss what has



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been translated into English, as well as what funding is available for such translation and promotion under the aegis of the new Petőfi Literary Fund. Finally, I will discuss how the issue of what children read has become a touchstone for the ideological conflict between right-wing "conservative" and liberal politics within Hungary.

### **Hungarian Children's Literature: the Past**

In her book on the children's author, Éva Janikovszky, the Hungarian literary historian Gabriella Komáromi divides Hungarian children's literature into two great eras: the first extends from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1920s, and includes writers such as Ferenc Molnár (1878-1952), Kálmán Mikszáth (1847-1910), Géza Gárdonyi (1863-1922), Zsigmond Móricz (1879-1942), Frigyes Karinthy (1887-1938) and Ferenc Móra (1879-1934); the second, so-called "golden age" of Hungarian children's literature stretches from the 1950s to the late 1980s and includes Sándor Weöres (1913-1989), Zoltán Zelk (1906-1981), István Kormos (1923-1977), Ágnes Nemes Nagy (1922-1991), Ervin Lázár (1936-2006), Éva Janikovszky (1926-2003), Iván Mándy (1918-1995), Magda Szabó (1917-2007), István Fekete (1900-1970), István Csukás (1936-2020) and Pál Békés (1956-2010) (Komáromi 2014: 250).

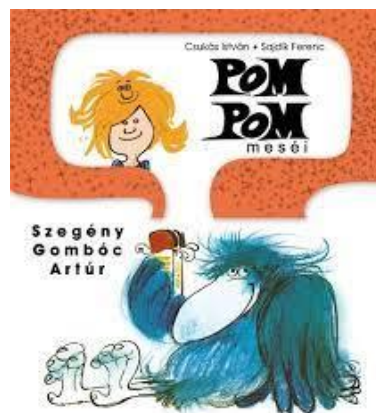
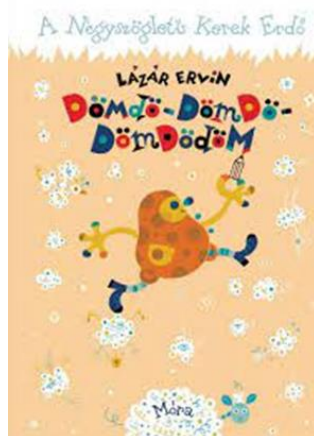
The first wave of writing for children came after an increase in awareness of the need for good-quality, original writing for children in the Hungarian language, and concern about the diet of poor translations from German-language writers available at the time. In 1888, a young parliamentary representative from Transylvania called Elek Benedek (1859-1929), the man who would come to be known as "the great storyteller" for his seminal folk tale collection, *Magyar mese- és mondavilág* ['The World of Hungarian Folktales and Proverbs'] published between 1894 and 1896, appealed the National Assembly for more support for Hungarian children's literature. The following year, Benedek and Lajos Pósa (1850-1914) started *Az Én Újságom* ['My Newspaper'], a children's magazine aimed at the six- to ten-year-old age group, to which they persuaded well-respected writers for adults to contribute (Komáromi 1990:15).

Works of fiction produced over the subsequent decade or two are still on the school syllabus for older children in Hungary. Examples include Molnár's *A Pál utcai fiúk* ['The Paul Street Boys'] (1906) and Gárdonyi's *Egri csillagok* ['Eclipse of the Crescent Moon'] (1899), still required reading in grades seven and eight, according to the new Hungarian National Curriculum (Oktatási Hivatal 2020b); Mikszáth's *Szent Péter esernyője* ['St. Peter's Umbrella'] (1895) and Móricz's *Légy jó mindhalálig* ['Be Faithful Unto Death'] (1920) are still "core material," and Karinthy's *Tanár úr kérem* ['Please, Sir!'] (1916) is "recommended material" for the same grades; for younger pupils, poems and short stories by Móra are core or recommended material (Oktatási Hivatal 2020a). Many other works by these writers still feature in the curriculum. The child's world of school, home, and the territory in between, is the setting for both Molnár's and Karinthy's works. *The Paul Street Boys* tells the story of an urban group of boys' valiant defence of an empty lot they have claimed for themselves and is an enduring classic about patriotism, life and death. Karinthy, by contrast, provides a humorous portrayal of the scrapes a city schoolboy gets into. Gárdonyi's book is a historical romance about the Siege of Eger in 1552 by the Turks, while Mikszáth's love-cum-detective story, while not obviously meant for children, has, by virtue of its magical elements and gentle portrayal of society in the far-flung northern regions of the country (now part of Slovakia), come to be regarded as appropriate for children. Móricz's

intense, tragic story of a boy accused of theft at a boarding school in the eastern city of Debrecen, is, however, perhaps more appropriate for adults despite the child protagonist.

The second period is inextricably associated with the publisher Móra, known until 1957 as Ifjúsági Kiadó ['Young People's Publishing House']. As the sole publisher of children's literature, it became a haven for writers such as Ágnes Nemes Nagy and Magda Szabó when they were not permitted to publish elsewhere due to their background or political views but allowed to make a living through literary translation and writing for children. While Nemes Nagy and Sándor Weöres stand out for their contribution to children's poetry, with Weöres's musical poems in particular still much loved by children as well as adults today, when it comes to prose, the literary historian and children's literature researcher Andrea Lovász picks out the "triad" of Ervin Lázár, Éva Janikovszky and István Csukás who, she says, "left their mark of quality on the seventies and eighties and the two decades that followed, their three differing voices offering enduring and useful reference points in children's literature" (Lovász 2008).

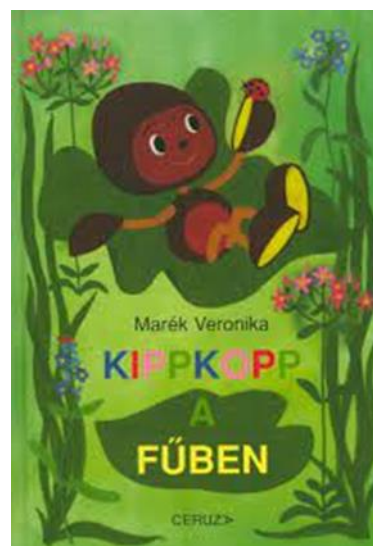
Lázár and Csukás are both described as writing in the genre of the *műmese* ['literary fairy tales']. Lázár in particular played with elements from the world of Hungarian fairy tales when he introduced characters such as the good Seven-Headed Fairy into his stories; his readers knew that traditionally it was wicked dragons who were seven-headed. (These dragons, incidentally, are more like rich, jealous husbands in their behavior and fly on the backs of magic steeds rather than being the fire-breathing, winged reptiles we know from English tradition and Tolkien.) While some of his stories, such as *Szegény Dzsoni és Árnika* ['Arnika the Duck Princess'], are peopled with witches, kings and princesses, they also include references to soccer and modern technology, and the demons that must be defeated are often internal, as in the case of Victor Coppermine, who must learn not to be continually taking offense. Csukás is best known for Süsü the Dragon, a character he inherited but made his own. Contrary to his family's expectations, Süsü is gentle and meek, loyal and loving. Both writers also created their own zany worlds: Lázár's *A négyszögletű kerek erdő* ['The Four-Square Round Forest'] abounds with curious figures like Dömdödöm, who never says anything other than the nonsense word, *dömdödöm*, a blue horse, a green fairy, a retired circus lion, a very bright rabbit and a walking fir tree. Csukás's world includes Pom Pom, a shapeless hairy creature that likes to ride on the top of the little girl Picur's head and Gombóc Artúr ['Arthur Dumpling'], a plump bird obsessed with eating chocolate.



Janikovszky's world (illustrated in spare, stick-figure style by László Réber) is, by contrast, the everyday world of kindergarten, school and the traditional family home, and offers the reader not stories, but rather "meditative" monologues relayed in a child's voice (Komáromi 2014:96) that present the conflict between the world as seen by children (at face value) and by adults, who, aware of its complexities, often resort to cliché and long-established patterns in their responses to children. It was in this period, says Lovász, "that what are regarded today as the basic principles of classic Hungarian children's literature were established: in terms of content this meant fiction, plenty of fairy-tale-like action and children as protagonists within a framework of the traditional family model; and, in terms of language, an increasing appreciation of humor, irony and children's own use of language" (Lovász 2008).

The publication in 1983 of Pál Békés's book *A kétbalkezes varázsló* ['The Ham-Fisted Wizard'], saw the introduction of "a new world of story-telling and a new children's world, one that was open to social and ethical problems" (Lovász 2008). The bungling wizard of the title is posted as the "district wizard" in a modern communist housing estate of uniform ten-story tower blocks. He discovers fairy-tale figures, who are living unhappily in the apartments, having been moved from their old dwellings to make way for a chemical factory and given new jobs in the modern economy. The monsters this wizard fights are the big metal bins in the basement and the creature who supposedly inhabits the heating system.

The 1960s and 70s also saw the arrival of Veronika Marék's classic *Boribon* series for younger children. Still immensely popular, these are produced in a smaller format (19.5 cm by 16.5 cm) and tell short, simple stories of the everyday adventures of a little girl called Annipanni and her teddy bear, Boribon. Their relationship is partly that of friends and partly that of parent and child. The illustrations, by the author herself, are bold and simple with bright, solid blocks of color. These were followed in the 1980s by her *Kippkopp* series about Kippkopp the "conker child." (Hungarian children make little figures in the autumn out of conkers ['horse chesnuts' in American English] and matchsticks). Kippkopp's adventures are those of a tiny creature among flowers and creatures of similar size. He acquires a family during the series and the whole cast have appeared on puppet theater stages – appropriately enough, given Marék's original training as a puppeteer.





With the fall of communism, Móra's monopoly on children's publishing in Hungary came to an end and, with the loss of state funding and the collapse of its distribution network, it could not continue to publish the number of titles it had in the past and was obliged to let many of its writers go. In 1992, it was privatized. The nineties saw the advent of hundreds of small, new publishers, many of whom would fall by the wayside, and an influx of foreign books into the children's book market. In 2021, Móra is still present on the children's book publishing scene, but faces stiff competition, especially when it comes to contemporary Hungarian children's books. This is illustrated by the 2020 shortlist for the Hungarian Children's Book of the Year, in which no fewer than seven books from the award-winning publisher Pagony appear, while Móra had only one title on the list. (*Könyves Magazin* 2020a)

### The Present Situation in Children's Book Publishing

Pagony has acquired most of Veronika Marék's *Annipanni and Boribon* books and, using the same format, publishes the very popular *Bogyó és Babóca* ['Berry and Dolly'] series by author-illustrator, Erika Bartos. For slightly older readers, they also publish the successful *Kufli* series, written and illustrated by András Dániel, the first book of which came out in 2013. The *kufli*s, which arrive from who knows where in the first book and dig themselves burrows in the side of a small hill, are 'neither *kukacok* ['maggots'] nor *kiflik* ['crescent-shaped bread rolls common in Hungary'], but, as their portmanteau name (ku-fli) suggests, look like a cross between the two. Not only are Dániel's characters difficult to define, his stories about them also wriggle out of our grasp when we try to pin them down. As Boldizsár Nagy says,

in his formally innovative books, András Dániel repeatedly overrides the well-trodden picture-book schemata...and is able for the umpteenth time to surprise us. The creatures that live on the 'Abandoned Meadow' (mostly used for lolling about on)... confront issues of philosophy, aesthetics and even theoretical physics. Their stories are not adventure-centered, being rather a sequence of scenes of a meditative nature, in which free rein is given to play and creativity (Nagy B. 2020).



Illustration from the animated series *The Kufli* (KEDD Studio)



From *Tengerre kuflik!* [To Sea, Kuflis!]

One feature of these books is the rather postmodern commentary offered in the speech bubbles of strange little extraneous creatures, such as when one unidentifiable creepy-crawly in the margins of *Tengerre kuflik!* [‘To Sea, Kuflis!’] asks another, “What do you think, is there a moral to this story?” [*Szerinted van ennek a történetnek tanulsága?*]. In *Zsebseprű a szötymag ellen* [‘Pocket Brooms versus Sunflower Seeds’], the second story in the book, a rat-like creature remarks, “I’m not a character, I’m just hanging around” [*Én nem szereplő vagyok, csak egy ácsorgó*].

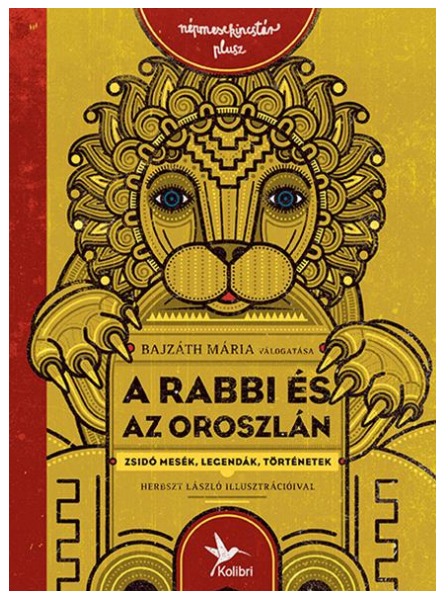
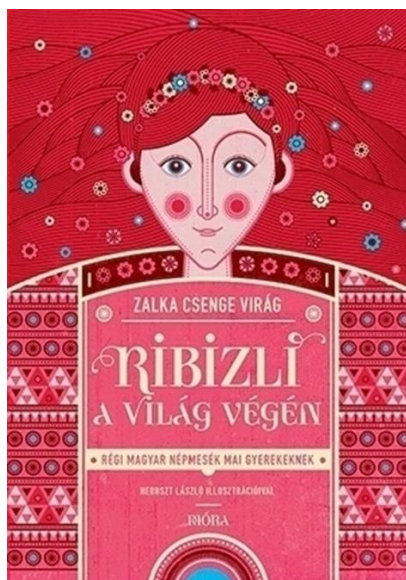
For the middle-school, eight-to-twelve-year-old age-group, Pagony has also been responsible for introducing Judit Berg’s *Rumini* series, which now extends to eight volumes, about the adventures of a sea-going mouse which has spawned a stage show and other publications. Erzszi Kertész’s *Panthera* adventure series is also published by Pagony, along with her witty and wise *Nem Mese* [‘The NO Story’], in which a boy is taught by a shape-shifting and color-changing creature called the NO about the many different ways in which he can say “no,” starting with politely declining a well-meaning neighbor’s offer of some cakes. Kertész’s *Labirintó* [‘Labyrinth Lake’], published by Cerkabella in 2018, also plays to some extent with fairy-tale tropes. Rather than making the hero the youngest son, Kertész’s protagonist is the oldest one, but triumphs nevertheless. The author exploits the tensions arising from its odd characters (some reminiscent of Lázár’s Four-Square Round Forest-dwellers) being confined at close-quarters on a gondola as they punt through the lake’s archipelago. Two more daring offerings from Pagony for this age group are the 2018 *Egy fiú a csapatból* [‘A Boy from the Team’] by Dóra Igaz, the first Hungarian children’s book to tackle the Holocaust, and Zsófia Bán’s *Vagánybagoly és a Harmadik Á* [‘Rough ‘n Tough Owl and Third Grade A’], in which the owl of the title helps a group of schoolchildren to be more accepting of otherness: one child has



two mothers, another is foreign (possibly a "migrant"); the group also overcomes its fear of a homeless man.

In 2013, Pagony launched an imprint for young adults called Tilos az Á. Móra's X series of the early 2010s has more recently given way to its LOL series of teenage romances. This area of children's publishing was dominated for a while after the fall of communism by foreign books in translation, but is now seeing Hungarian writers taking up the challenge, from Eszter T. Molnár's *Stand-Up* series (launched in 2016), which deals with life in a dysfunctional family, and Ágnes Mészöly's *Szabadlábon* ['Walking Free'] (2016), about a wheelchair-using teenage boy who runs away from home, to Balázs Zágoni's science-fiction novel *A gömb* ['The Sphere'], winner of the Book of the Year Young Adult category in 2019. Móra has also brought out a series of thematic short-story collections for young adults by contemporary writers, starting with *Jelen!* ['Present!'], which won the 2015 Children's Book of the Year Young Adult category.

Other recent developments in Hungarian children's literature include a more inclusive approach to the folk tradition, with collections of tales from minority communities, like Móra's *A bűvös puska* ['The Magic Rifle'] (2015), Gypsy tales collected from the Croatian-speaking minority in the south of Hungary by György Frankovics, and Kolibri's *A rabbi és az oroszlán* ['The Rabbi and the Lion'] (2018), Jewish folktales and sayings collected from a mixture of English-language, Yiddish and Hungarian sources by Mária Bajzáth. In 2019 Móra published storyteller Csenge Virág Zalkai's *Ribizli a világ végén* ['Redcurrant at the End of the World'], the first Hungarian attempt at producing a feminist folktale collection. In Boldizsár Nagy's words, 'In the world of the familiar, sexist Hungarian folktale, it is as if Sleeping Beauty were awakening from a coma she was forced into, making it possible at last to see how colorful and varied our folk culture really is [*A jól ismert, szexista magyar népmesei közegeben mintha felébredne a kómába kényszerített Csipkerózsika, és végre látjuk, népi kultúránk milyen színes valójában*] (Nagy, Boldizsár. 2019). Interestingly, although these three volumes have been produced by two different publishers, they are visually of a piece thanks to the strong colors and densely packed detail of their common illustrator, László Herbszt's instantly recognizable style.



Independently of Frankovics's volume, it is interesting to see a new use of folk-tale forms in Krisztina Tóth's book *A lány aki nem beszélt* ['The Girl Who Didn't Speak'] (Móra 2015). The story of a girl born to and abandoned by a Gypsy couple living in the woods, who is then adopted by a family in the village and eventually reunited with her birth parents and finds her human voice in the process, not only argues for a meeting of minds and exchange of cultural knowledge between the settled community and the nomadic one, the mainstream population and the minority Roma, but also uses patterns and themes from Gypsy folktales. It is an "origin story" of sorts, of the kind often found in the Gypsy folk tradition and, as Gabriella Ágnes Nagy points out, "shapes ... at the level of the plot a fairy-tale narrative which rewrites the Hungarian-language folk-tale tradition of the Roma, and places the Roma way of life in a cultural and social context" [A cselekmény szintjén tehát olyan mesei narratívát alkot meg, amely újraírja a magyar nyelvű cigány népmesei hagyományt, valamint a cigányok létmódját kulturális-társadalmi kontextusba helyezi] (Nagy G. Á. 2017: 55). The rewriting of specific fairy tales from different points of view, or in order to challenge the presentation of gender roles is, of course not new in the English-language children's literature world. (See Robert Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess* 1980 and Roald Dahl's 1982 *Revolting Rhymes*, and for the braver reader, *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* 1992). I will return to this topic when I discuss the collection *Fairytales for Everyone*.

An exciting range of Hungarian children's literature exists, then, ranging from the early classic works of fiction, through the 'golden age' of stories and poetry in the fifties to the seventies, to the varied palette of present-day publication for children, with its wider range of genres, its more diverse subject matter and its celebration of the possibilities of language as a source of fun and experiment.

### **Translation of Hungarian Children's Literature**

There is actually more of this literature available in English (at least in Hungary) than might be assumed from the opening paragraph of this essay, as a virtual visit to the children's section of the almost three-decade-old English-language Budapest bookshop, Bestsellers, will show. As of April 2021, the shop's website is offering the following works in English translation from the "first period:" *The Princess of the Wind*, a collection of fairy tales from Elek Benedek, translated by Elizabeth Demeter (Corvina 2014), Ferenc Molnár's *The Paul Street Boys* in an "updated" version of L. Rittenberg's 1927 translation (Corvina 2018), Géza Gárdonyi's *The Eclipse of the Crescent Moon*, translated by G. F. Cushing (Corvina 1991) and Zsigmond Móricz's *Be Faithful Unto Death*, translated by Stephen Vizinczey (CEU Press 2015.)

From the second "golden" period we find no fewer than seventeen titles by Éva Janikovszky (Móra), three by Veronika Marék (Móra), two by Ervin Lázár (Pushkin Children's Press and Móra) and one by István Fekete (Móra). More recent children's writing is represented by two *Berry and Dolly* books by Erika Bartos (Pagony), one by Anca Hohol also for young children (Móra), and one volume from Judit Berg's *Rumini* series (Pagony.) It can be seen that, with the exception of Ervin Lázár's *Arnica the Duck Princes*, all of these volumes have been issued by Hungarian publishers. The predominance of Éva Janikovszky is perhaps explained by the fact that since it was privatized, Móra has been owned in part by Janikovszky's son, János Janikovszky (the model for the little boy who grows up through the books), and her books are regularly reprinted by the publisher.

Móra's current offerings in English can be seen from their 2020 flyer (Móra 2020). Móra has published twenty-two titles in English to date and in recent years also six bilingual books.



According to Katalin Vas, Head of Publishing and Operations at the publishing house, "it has long been important to Móra that the 'golden oldies' of Hungarian children's literature be available in foreign languages...they also come in very useful when we would like to sell the foreign rights of certain works." Their flyer, she says, "was produced for schools, libraries and institutions (in Hungary) where the English language is studied and used, or where English is the language of instruction." These books are bought by "foreigners living in Hungary, Hungarians or foreigners living abroad ...it's a very varied picture." In response to my question about whether British or American publishers have enquired after any of their books, she replied, "For the time being, word of Central European children's literature gets through to them only with the greatest difficulty." (Personal communication, 2021).

The fact remains that very few translated books are published in English, and of those, very few are children's books. In 2018, Kirsten Malmkjær wrote that,

Out of the 3% of all books published in the UK each year that are translated, only 1% are children's books (Hallford and Zaghini 2005: 5). A later study (Donahaye 2012: 4) suggests that the percentage of books published in the UK that are translated is in fact "consistently greater than 4%", but unfortunately, an even later Media Release, published 13th April 2015 by Literature Across Frontiers (<http://www.lit-across-frontiers.org/new-translation-statistics-from-laf/>) defends the 3% view. Anyway, the number of translated books for children published in the UK is small' (Malmkjær 2018).

In a review of translated children's books published in the UK between 2005 and 2014, Deborah Hallford of *Outside In World* noted that,

470 titles were translated.... Of this, 443 were titles translated from European countries. The top five languages were:

- French 193
- German 91
- Dutch 40
- Swedish 37
- Danish 18 (Hallford 2016)

From these figures, it is clear that a small group of Western European and Scandinavian European languages dominate the translated children's book offerings in the UK.

In an article about the issue in the United States in 2019, Elizabeth Bird wrote that,

The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin is the source of the most authoritative data on translated children's literature. In 2018, it counted 169 children's books in translation, about 4.56% of the total it received. That number has increased an average of 9% each year since 2002, when the CCBC identified only 75 translations, representing 2.38% of the total books that year (Bird 2019).

In the same article, she also observed that, "The CCBC's data reveals that 72% of total children's book translations in 2018 came from just four languages—French, German, Italian and Spanish."

The chances of a Hungarian children's book being picked up by a British or American publisher do appear to be very slim indeed. The reasons for this may include publishers being more likely to have an editor who reads one of these major languages; there simply being a greater quantity of French and German children's literature and its being better promoted, and a self-perpetuating unfamiliarity with a culture that for many decades was out of reach behind the Iron Curtain.

It is perhaps useful at this juncture to look at how two Hungarian children's books *have* managed to make it to publication abroad, one while the Iron Curtain was still firmly in place, another much more recently: Éva Janikovszky's *Ha én felnőtt lennék* ['If I Were a Grown-Up'] in West Germany in 1972, and my own translation of Ervin Lázár's *Arnica the Duck Princess* in Britain in 2019. In both cases their publication was not due to any effort on the Hungarian publisher's part, but instead a chance encounter by an individual outside the publishing world who then succeeded in exciting the foreign publishers' interest.

Around 1970, a young West German teacher was in Hungary learning to ride. She asked her riding teacher to help her with her Hungarian, and he decided that Janikovszky's book would be a useful resource. Together they put together a rough translation of it which she took back to Germany with her and showed to some friends of hers. These friends were just setting up a tiny publishing company in a garage in Mülheim that was to become Anrich Press. In 1972, they put the book in, under the German title *Große Dürfen Alles* ['Grown-ups Are Allowed to Do Anything'] (most likely translated by Irene Kolbe) for the Deutscher Jugendbuchpreis, and it was selected as the winner in the picture book category. Since then, Janikovszky's books have been translated into thirty-five other languages (Komáromi 2014: 57-60).

In 2016, my eleven-year-old daughter was assigned Lázár's book by her Hungarian teacher as summer reading. I read it, too, and was so charmed by it that I decided to translate it as a private exercise in the craft. I pitched a sample to Pushkin Children's Press. Some six months later, they replied, asking for more chapters. No more word came, however, until a few months later, when I was attending the British Centre for Literary Translation Summer School in Norwich, where my workshop leader, the British literary translator Daniel Hahn, introduced me to Pushkin's assistant editor who had come up from London to take part in a publishers' panel discussion at the Summer School. A British children's writer I knew also put in a word for the book. By November of 2017, I had received a contract. Ervin's book, therefore, came to the attention of a British publisher partly through a non-Hungarian accidentally coming upon the book, being impressed by it, and making the case for its publication. It probably helped that Lázár was an established name in Hungary, that his books were available in other languages, and that he had received the Children's Book of the Year award from the Hungarian IBBY three times.

A more obvious route for children's books to come to the attention of UK and American publishers is, of course, the Bologna Children's Book Fair. While the Hungarian Illustrators' Association had been participating at the Fair since 1995, it was only from 2002 that Hungary had its own stand, run by the Illustrators' Association, with state support from the National

Cultural Heritage Ministry (Nemzeti Erőforrás Minisztérium 2006). Although Hungary was the guest of honor at the fair in 2006, between 2007 and 2018 it was sometimes represented on the smallest of stands (Pompor 2010) and was absent altogether in 2016. Art historian Emese Révész's article on the 2019 fair, when the newly reformed Hungarian section of IBBY (HUBBY) was not invited by the state body running it, gives a less than flattering picture of the impression the Hungarian stand made on that occasion and suggests that this was the rule rather than the exception: "The failure of the Hungarian stand to impress is the result of the accumulated sediment of many years' negligence." The stand, she writes, lacked visual impact, and was too cluttered, with no "filtering or focus," meaning that works that may have been relevant internationally were "lost in the melee of offerings." In her opinion, the promotional material was amateurish. The presentation of this, she writes, "requires the involvement of an expert in the field, if possible one who can create an advanced, high quality visual background for the presentation of Hungarian children's books" (Révész 2019).

Frequent restructuring of Hungarian state funding for the translation and promotion of Hungarian literature abroad may have contributed to this poor showing. There have been no fewer than four major changes to how state funding is managed since the independent Hungarian Book Foundation was founded in 1997. The latest of these took place in early 2019, when a new body, the Petőfi Literary Fund, was set up by the Hungarian state. Its website says that,

it is in charge of coordinating the Hungarian presence at international book fairs, it provides support for translators and publishing houses outside of Hungary, it helps people prominent on the Hungarian book market gain exposure outside the country, and it cultivates interest in Hungarian literature the world over with its own publications and media (Petőfi Literary Fund 2021).

Throughout the course of 2020, it awarded grants to early-career and established translators for the creation of sample translations. Similar grants were awarded to Hungarian and foreign publishers, and so-called 'micro-grants' were available to facilitate, for example, the travel of a Hungarian author to a book launch of a translated work abroad. The Petőfi Literary Fund also produced several English-language brochures in both paper and electronic format to publicize Hungarian literature at book fairs and other events. Two of these focused on children's literature: *Children's Books: Publishers' Selection* and *New Hungarian Childlit 10.0 tales*. As these publications have won a design award, perhaps, when it becomes possible to attend the Bologna Children's Book Fair once again – after the pandemic – they will make more of an impact than the promotional material Révész considered so "amateur."

Two grants were awarded in 2020 to the Hungarian publisher Csimóta for translation of a Hungarian children's book into English: an illustrated young adult novel by Ildikó Lipták: *Csak neked akartunk jót* ['We Only Wanted What was Best For You'] and a book of fiction for younger readers by Mari Takács: *Bingaminga és a Babkák* ['Bingaminga and the Beanlings']. While the grants for Hungarian publishers have a rolling deadline, the other grants have a limited timeframe. To date, however, no new calls for applications have been announced in 2021 for either early-career translators or established translators, and no new brochures have been produced. Whether this is an effect of the pandemic remains to be seen.

Another internationally visible forum is the IBBY Honor List, which is produced every two years by the International Board on Books for Young People, a "non-profit organization which represents an international network of people from all over the world who are committed to bringing books and children together" (IBBY 2021). The Hungarian Section, re-established as HUBBY in 2015, selects Hungarian works to be included in it, ensuring that a handful of Hungarian books will feature in the categories of writing, illustration and translation. The latest of these, listed in 2020, is Dóra Gimesi's *A Macskaherceg kilencedik élete* ['The Cat Prince's Ninth Life'] (Pagony 2017), a pair of modern fairy tales set firmly in present-day Hungary. This list is a resource for foreign publishers searching for a book to translate and publish. It is, however, very extensive, and the selections of current foreign children's literature and features done on a blog such as World Kid Lit are probably more useful.

Bringing Hungarian children's books to the English-speaking world is not an easy task, but an improved presence at the Bologna Book Fair and an increase in the number of personal connections between the Hungarian book world and UK and American publishers will hopefully make a difference.

### **Hungarian Children's Literature Embroiled in Politics**

As we saw in the section on present-day Hungarian children's literature, Hungarian writers and publishers for children have in recent years been more willing to tackle areas of life previously considered taboo or off-limits to writing for children. As well as exploring periods of history that remain sensitive in Hungary, such as the Holocaust, *Egy fiú a csapatból* ['A Boy from the Team'] by Dóra Igaz) and the expulsion of ethnic Germans after World War Two (*Szepi hazatérő lelke* ['Szepi's Spirit Returns Home'] József Békés, Littera Nova, 2002), writers have told stories about situations that often carry stigma or that present great difficulties for children, such as living with a disability (*Szabadlábon* ['Walking Free'] by Ágnes Mészöly, Tilos az Á 2016), having a parent who is an alcoholic (Children's Book of the Year award-winner *A muter meg a dzsinnek* ['Mom and the Jinns'] by Dóra Elekes, Csimóta 2017), and having serious illness in the family (*Anyát megoperálták* ['Mom's Had an Operation'] by Krisztina Tóth, Móra 2015). Racial prejudice is central to *Dzsorden*, Péter Horváth's young adult novel about a teenage Roma boy (Noran Libro, 2012), and xenophobia is touched on in Zsófia Bán's *Rough 'n Tough Owl and Third Grade A*. We have seen a feminist and multi-cultural re-evaluation of traditional cultural heritage such as folk tales and a focus on meeting and understanding marginalized groups in society, for example the homeless and the LGBTQ+ community (Eszter T. Molnár's *A kóbor szálló* ['Hotel for Strays'] Pagony, 2018, and the book by Zsófia Bán mentioned above).

Most recently, and most controversially, we have seen a clash between those seeking to bring these kinds of topics to the attention of children and the "Christian conservative" values espoused and promoted by Viktor Orbán's ruling Fidesz party and other right-wing groups in the country. Under Fidesz, the Hungarian Parliament recently voted to insert a paragraph into the constitution defining the family on the traditional model and "defending" the institution of



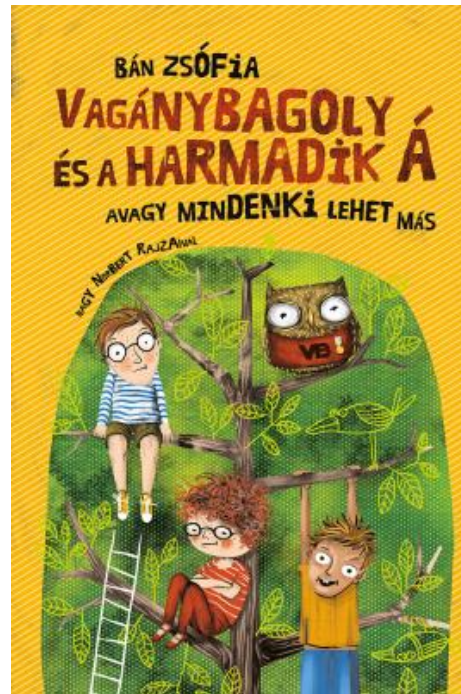
marriage<sup>1</sup>. In December of the same year, it effectively banned LGBTQ+ people from adopting children by making marriage (an option not available to same-sex couples) a requirement for adoption.

In 2020, a row erupted about the publication of *Meseország mindenkié* ['Fairytale for Everyone'], a book of fairy tales featuring characters from various marginalized groups, including people of color, children living in non-traditional families (e.g. with a single parent), as an adopted child, and also LGBTQ+ people. The book was published by the Labrisz Lesbian Association. As the editor Boldizsár Nagy explained to *Könyves Magazin* ['Magazine of Books'], established authors were invited to contribute stories, but writing from younger, amateur writers was also welcomed. Contributors were expected to "work up classic stories in a new, creative way while maintaining a high literary standard" and also to "feature a marginalized group of some kind or a problem that was rarely dealt with" (*Könyves Magazin* 2020b). The classic literary tales reworked in the book include *Bambi* (Edit Szűcs's *Az őzike agancsa* ['Koni's Antlers']) and *Thumbelina* (Petra Finy's *Panna élni megy* ['Panna Goes Off to Live']) and *The Snow Queen* (Judit B. Tóth's *A jégkirály* ['The Snow King']), as well as traditional fairy tales such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Eszter Gangl's *Aranybarna* ['Goldenbrown']), and even Ancient Greek myths (Krisztina Rita Molnár's *Rubinpiros madár* ['Ruby Red Bird']).

When *Fairytales for Everyone* came to the attention of the deputy leader of the far-right party *Mi Hazánk Mozgalom* ['Our Homeland Movement'] Dóra Dúró, she ripped pages out of it and shredded them publicly during an online press conference, then publicized this modern equivalent of book-burning on her Facebook page, declaring, "*Our Homeland Movement* does not tolerate children being exposed to homosexual propaganda in the form of abnormal lifestyles smuggled into story books and thereby lying to children, as homosexual princes are not part of Hungarian culture" (Quoted in *Magyar Narancs* Sept. 25, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> Hungarian Constitution L. Paragraph 1: "Hungary defends the institution of marriage as a union between a man and woman.... The basis of family relationships is marriage and the parent-child relationship. A mother is a woman, a father is a man." Cited from Farkas, Ágnes Virág 2020.



As Jozefina Komporaly reported in her article about the controversy for *Asymptote*, the online journal of translated literature, things did not stop there:

An unprecedented number of high-profile public figures took a stance against the book [including] numerous politicians, but also specialists in the humanities and the social sciences...this wave of rudimentary censorship continued with party activists boycotting public readings, displaying defamatory posters at bookshops selling the title, and with Dúró literally ripping apart another children's book. *Vagánybagoly és a harmadik Á, avagy mindenki lehet más* (Cool Owl and the Third A, or Everybody Is Entitled to be Different) was published in 2019, but it ended up on the receiving end of Dúró's rage simply because its author, Zsófia Bán, had previously delivered a speech at the opening of Budapest Pride (Komporaly 2020).

This attempt at censorship resulted in the book rapidly selling out. By the end of September 2020, those who wanted a copy had to place an order for the reprint. While this collection may not become a classic, it has opened up a debate about what the function of children's literature might be within society, and inside Hungary it has further pushed the boundaries of what children's literature can discuss.

Not long afterwards, a debate flared up about what children should or should not be reading at school, after the author Krisztina Tóth indicated, in response to a question put regularly to authors in a Q&A column called "What Do Writers Read?" in *Könyves Magazin* that she believed *Az aranyember* ['The Golden Man'], the nineteenth-century classic by Mór Jókai ought to be removed from the compulsory reading list. Not, she said primarily "on account of it being difficult for students to read and therefore off-putting to them, but because of the way the female characters are portrayed.... Our children construct their idea of what gender roles should

be from the books they read at school (*Könyves Magazin*, Feb 11, 2021). The female characters in Jókai's novel, she pointed out, are obedient to the men they love, and are undemanding, uncomplaining and unquestioning as they execute their domestic duties.

Her comments were picked up shortly afterwards in an article in *Heti világgazdaság* (HVG) ['Weekly World Economy'], Hungary's economic and political weekly, after which, in the words of László Valuska, editor-in-chief of *Könyves Magazin* in his own article written two weeks later, "all hell broke loose" and "a bout of internet writer-lynching kicked off" (Valuska 2021). Tóth defended her position on her Facebook page and was bombarded with messages and letters from Jókai fans. Dog feces were even put in her letterbox. Valuska explains that "the reason we ask that question [Which book ought to be taken off the compulsory reading list?] is that the set books amount to a canon; they determine our lives and our reading habits. They even influence the picture we form of society" (Valuska 2021).

A lot is at stake, therefore, when decisions are made about what children must read at school. When the new *Nemzeti Kerettanterv* ['National Curriculum'] was published in 2020, some commentators were horrified to see that the Nobel Prize-winning author Imre Kertész, best known for his writings about the Holocaust, and the canonical author Géza Ottlik were missing from it, while authors better known for their right-wing views than their literary merit, such as Ferenc Herczeg and Albert Wass had been included. The Hungarian Teachers Association stated publicly that

[t]his curriculum once again makes literary education the handmaiden of ideology and politics and knocks the teaching of Hungarian back into a role from which it managed to free itself in 1978. The concept of literature it adopts, breaking as it does with, and opposing the linguistic realisation of, the works and their value to national cultural identity, is not conservative. It is outdated.... It highlights elements of the classroom material that present Hungarians as a persecuted people, emphasizes grief over Trianon and declares unity with Hungarians over the borders. While we do not dispute the legitimacy of that pain, nor the cross-border nature of Hungarian literature, we believe making that pain the guiding principle of literary history is an act profoundly hostile to literature itself (Magyartanárok Egyesülete 2020).

In this political environment it is, therefore, interesting to see Zsófia Bán's book *Rough 'n Tough Owl and Third Grade A* featured in the Petőfi Literary Fund brochure *New Hungarian Childlit 10.0* and Krisztina Tóth's *The Girl Who Didn't Speak* featured in their *Children's Books from Hungary: Publishers' Selection* brochure.

It is to be hoped that more Hungarian children's books will come to the attention of American and British publishers through some or all of the channels I have discussed, whether those be online events such as the World Kid Lit panel discussion, a more effective presence at the Bologna Book Fair, a continuation (or resumption?) of grants for sample translations, travel expenses for authors and the publication of attractive brochures, or the efforts of Hungarian publishers and translators from Hungarian to select books that will appeal to such publishers and pitch them appropriately. There are bold publishers and many exciting new authors and illustrators to choose from in Hungary today, authors who, despite the current government's illiberal ideology and its efforts to skew the official canon towards the right, are acknowledging Hungary's diverse heritage and drawing on it for inspiration and subject matter.

(All translations are by the author)

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